

## Is it time to rethink your interview questions?

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So ... tell me about yourself.

Anyone who has ever been through a job interview has probably been asked this question. Depending on whom you talk to, it's either the best question you can ask or a potential minefield.

Those who love the question will argue it can elicit valuable information about a person's motivations and personality. I read a blog post recently in which the writer said the best answer to this question he ever heard was that the candidate had climbed the highest mountain on every continent. In less than a minute, according to the writer, he had extrapolated her experience to determine that she possessed a variety of admirable qualities, and he deemed her a "qualified person anyone would want on their team."

Perhaps he was right. Or perhaps not. We'll never know because he doesn't say if he hired her, but jumping to that conclusion based on such a general question so early in the process could lead to hiring someone who actually isn't a match for the job at all.

Of course, most people haven't climbed the tallest mountains in the world, so answers to that question will often be much more mundane and even more meaningless in the process. The interviewer is left making assumptions based on his or her own perspective on life, instead of focusing on whether the candidate is well-qualified for the job.

Beyond the very real possibility of hiring someone who isn't a match for the job, another danger for interviewers is that the question might elicit information that shouldn't be discussed in the interview process—things like marital status, kids or health concerns. Some interviewers might think there's no harm because the candidate volunteered the information rather than being asked about it, but that's not necessarily true.

Consider this possible scenario: You recently interviewed someone who mentioned a health problem as part of his response to your opening line of, "Tell me about yourself." You wisely steered away from the topic and moved on to job-related topics. After consideration, you decided not to hire that individual based on qualifications. Seems open and shut, right?

From the candidate's perspective, though, he remembers that you got a funny look on your face when he mentioned the health problem and that you avoided the topic. In his eyes, that health concern might be the reason he didn't get the job. And the more he thinks about it, the more he considers talking with someone about discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"Tell me about yourself" isn't the only popular question interviewers should probably re-examine. Google was famous at one point for its brainteaser questions, such as, "How many golf

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balls would fit inside a 747?” or, “How much should you charge to wash all the windows in Seattle?” Like the “Tell me about yourself” question, answers were used to make assumptions about personality and problem-solving skills.

And because Google is considered one of the best places to work in the country, other employers followed its lead and started adopting all sorts of peculiar questions. What many of those companies have failed to realize, though, is that Google stopped using those questions years ago. Why? As Laszlo Bock, the company’s former senior vice president of people operations, told The New York Times, “We found that brainteasers are a complete waste of time. They don’t predict anything. They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart.”

Bock’s assertions were data-driven, as you might expect from a company like Google. The company analyzed thousands of interviews, seeking a correlation between high scores on the brainteaser questions and successful job performance, and found none. Instead, Google now uses structured interviews with behavioral questions that seek examples of experience that would relate to the particular job being filled.

For example, for an entry-level management position, you might ask the candidate: “Give me an example of a time you had to motivate an employee to do something they didn’t want to do,” or, “Tell me about a time you had to get buy-in from colleagues to accomplish a goal.” Questions like these aren’t as entertaining as, “How many piano tuners are there in the entire world?” However, they are much more likely to help you find the right employee for the job.

And if you are really attached to the “Tell me about yourself” line of questioning, at least consider giving it a more professional spin: “Tell me about your career in IT,” or, “Tell me about your professional background.” You’ll still get broad answers, but those answers should help you make better hiring decisions.